

# Interpreting Slavery at National Trust Sites

## A Case Study in Addressing Difficult Topics

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**A**midst all the discussion in recent years about the responsibilities of museums both to educate and entertain, perhaps nothing focuses the issue for history museums and historic sites more emphatically than a finding in the Center for History-Making's survey of 1,500 Americans, analyzed by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*.<sup>\*</sup> In ranking the trustworthiness of sources for information about the past, only one third of respondents gave their high school history teachers high marks, but 80% trusted what they learn from museums! For the country's several thousand historic sites, these results are both wonderfully affirming and somewhat scary. If "seeing is believing" at historic sites, there is much to see—architecture, historical landscapes, furnishings, period costumes, even documents—and it all looks so convincing. Visitors believe these things "speak for themselves"; those of us working in the field know objects that seem so concrete and fixed are merely fragments, pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that is far from complete. What meaning these fragments of past culture have derives from the cultural and professional contexts we bring to them as histori-

ans, curators, educators, preservation architects, archeologists, landscape specialists, interpreters, and guides. While it is encouraging to know that the public believes the stories imparted by museums, this only increases our responsibility to make sure our interpretations are as inclusive and as accurate as we can make them. This is a tall order.

History is an interpretive construct that continuously changes, reflecting the questions and perspectives of the contemporary culture as it seeks to make the past meaningful to its own world. Our understanding of the past has changed since Washington's Headquarters State Historic Site in Newburgh, New York, was established on July 4, 1850, as the first publicly operated historic site in America. Through much of the 20th century, the study and teaching of history continued to focus on the great men and great events; but starting in the 1970s, interpretations began to change, in part responding to social changes, including the civil rights movement, resistance against the War in Vietnam, the women's movement, and the American Indian movement, and to the rise of social history among academic historians, which examined history "from the bottom up." The focus of American history began to move beyond the "great white men" to include the struggles and achievements of ordinary people in the past. There has been a parallel change in history education, from relying totally on the textbook, with its single authoritative voice, to a more hands-on and discovery-based curriculum that incorporates a range of sources and themes. At the beginning of the 21st century, the increased awareness of the "global community" and of a more ethnically and culturally diverse population in the U.S. further changes what we want to know about the past.

Of all historic sites, historic house museums particularly have been bastions of "traditional"

*Stairs leading down to slave work spaces and storage rooms, Drayton Hall, Charleston, South Carolina. Photo courtesy National Trust for Historic Preservation (DH.int.0040).*



cultural values. The National Trust for Historic Preservation has 20 such sites, ranging from Montpelier, home of James Madison, Father of the Constitution, to the home and studio of architect Frank Lloyd Wright. For the past decade or longer, many National Trust sites have taken steps to develop broader and more inclusive interpretations of the sites as a whole, both physically and in terms of interpretive themes and stories. Two recent additions to the collection—the Gaylord Building, an industrial site along the Illinois and Michigan Canal, and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum—very pointedly interpret the lives of “ordinary” working people. Still, across the board there is much more to do to make the sites more meaningful, not only for our current public, but also for new audiences who have not visited our sites in the past. To survive, to flourish, historic sites must reach out to the public with a picture of the past that is more complete, more inclusive, and ultimately, more honest.

Nowhere is this challenge more difficult than at sites where the history includes the enslavement of Africans and their descendents. What follows is a description of some of the work a few National Trust sites have been doing together to address the interpretation of slavery and the progress they have begun to make. Their experiences have implications for a whole range of sites across the country as they develop more inclusive interpretations that bring to light the complex and often disturbing stories that have so often been kept in the shadows.

Slaves once lived at eight of the National Trust’s sites. Most are plantation sites: Belle Grove, Montpelier, Oatlands, and Woodlawn, all in Virginia; Shadows-on-the-Teche in Louisiana; and Drayton Hall in South Carolina; but slaves also lived for a time at Cliveden in Philadelphia and Decatur House in Washington, DC. And at several of these, substantial staff resources have gone into the development of African-American history interpretation. Over the past 10 years, for example, Shadows-on-the-Teche has been co-teaching African-American history courses at several area high schools and involving these students in the site’s research and presentation of African-American history. At Drayton Hall, in addition to information in the general guided house tour and self-guided landscape tour, a daily program gives visitors an opportunity to explore evidence of slave life in more depth. An exhibit at Montpelier

and an audio tour of the landscape installed in 1998 identifies slaves by name and tells some of their individual stories.

For the most part, however, the focus of interpretation at all of these sites has been on the white families who owned them. The interpretation of African Americans (who in most cases were the majority of occupants in the 18th and 19th centuries) has been marginal and general, particularly in the guided tour, which is the baseline experience for most visitors. The goal for the Trust’s modestly-funded initiative was to advance the process of interpreting the sites more holistically and, in particular, to incorporate the interpretation of slavery into the core public offerings: guided tours of the houses and interpretive signage and self-guided tours of the landscape. We decided to focus on the six sites within driving distance of Washington, DC, (and of each other) over a six-month period from September 1999 to February 2000, with a final workshop the following fall. Because of funding considerations, Drayton Hall and Shadows-on-the-Teche would participate largely through site visits from our historian consultant and long-distance dialogue.

The project was organized around five day-long workshops spaced about a month apart. The workshops were attended by teams of two to five staff members per site, including curators, educators, and guides, who would spearhead the process at their respective sites. Each workshop was held at a different site; people got to see one another’s sites firsthand; and whichever site was hosting the meeting became the focus for a case study. Workshop topics included contextual history, research, the telling of slaves’ stories through site resources, thematic tours, and guide training. Between workshops, the site teams did contextual reading, conducted site-specific research, worked on storylines and themes for the new tours, and began planning exhibits, self-guided landscape tours, and other programs. They received specially-prepared background papers on the history of slavery in the upper South, particularly Virginia, customized bibliographies, copies of journal articles, etc., and key publications. Leading the workshops was John Schlotterbeck, Professor of History at DePauw University, who is both a scholar of southern history and a strong and insightful advocate for the interpretation of history at historic sites. Professor Schlotterbeck was on sabbatical and thus available to work with the Trust sites intensively over several months. He

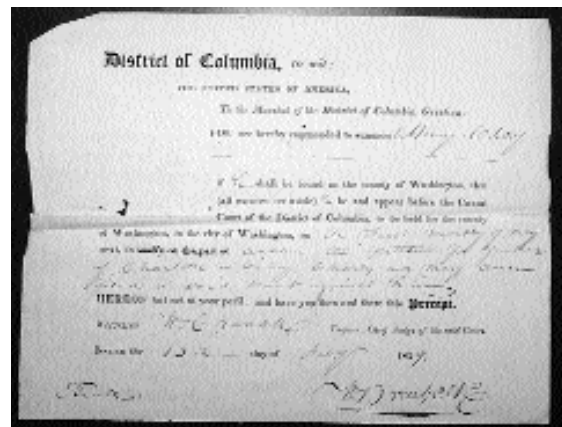
visited each site at least twice and provided guidance and support to individual sites through frequent e-mail and conference calls. He also visited several prominent sites that interpret slavery (including Monticello, Colonial Williamsburg, Mt. Vernon, Conner Prairie, and Middleton Place) and brought his observations back to the group. We also had assistance from James Horton, Professor of History at George Washington University, who shared his research and perspective at the workshop at Decatur House, and from Robert Watson, formerly of Colonial Williamsburg and now on the faculty at Hampton University, who provided constructive criticism and encouragement at three of the workshops.

The first workshop, held September 1999, at Montpelier, bristled both with enthusiasm and friction. Most people were excited about finally getting some help with what they considered an important but daunting task. At the same time, they expressed a number of concerns. Was there enough research to move forward in presenting the story to the public? While all of the sites had some documentation relating to slavery, the information often seemed too scanty for substantive interpretation. Little was known about the slaves as individuals or about how slaves' lives at a particular site fit into the larger history of slavery in the region and over time. Much of the concern revolved around how to talk with visitors about slavery and how to give guides the skills to be comfortable and effective. How would a guide react if visitors asked questions such as whether the slave owner was a good or bad master? In some cases, there was a feeling that introducing slavery in a significant way would reflect negatively on the white owners, a significant issue for sites that had been preserved by descendants of the original owners as memorials to their ancestors' achievements. Another concern was about how visitors, both blacks and whites, would react to an interpretation that included slavery, as well as beautiful furnishings and gardens. Could the tour incorporate both? And many people in this nearly all white group expressed concern about the lack of African-American staff at the sites and whether or not whites could be accepted as credible interpreters of slavery. Finally, there was concern about how the extra demands of the slavery interpretation initiative would impact already tight work schedules and budgets. Discussion was a bit guarded, since few knew one another or had

visited each other's sites. Some people remained silent, not sure where they stood.

Six months later, at the February 2000 workshop at Woodlawn in Alexandria, Virginia, the mood was completely different. Staff from the various sites mixed easily and, for the most part, talked openly about their ideas and their concerns. While they didn't gloss over the challenges that lay ahead in training interpretive staff to deal with the issues that might arise or the need to do more research, the excitement about exploring the site's history in a new way with the public was palpable, and there was a sense that they had taken some significant first steps. Each institution had made real progress. Oatlands, for example, which had always focused on the early-20th-century history as a country estate, had begun planning signage for the landscape, which, for the first time, would identify outbuildings by their original use and include excerpts from plantation diaries identifying slaves by name. The curator, on close reading of the diary of a plantation mistress, discovered evidence of possible resistance by a house slave, Fan. In many cases, being able to focus on an individual slave gave the interpretive story presence and immediacy. Research led to unexpected discoveries. Staff examining the Henry Clay papers for information about his occupancy at Decatur House, uncovered the existence of the first slave who could be documented to the site, a woman named Lotty Dupuy, who had brought suit against Clay, petitioning for her freedom. Lotty's dramatic story has now been woven into the interpretation of a room recently discovered to have been a kitchen, a space where she would have almost certainly spent much of her time. At Belle Grove, with a list of the names of slaves in hand, the process has begun to flesh out daily lives and people the site as never before. Having already collected documentary informa-

*Summons for Henry Clay to appear at court to defend his ownership of Lotty Dupuy. Photo courtesy National Archives and Records Administration (Entry 6, Box 437, Folder 121, Unit No. NWCTBPO).*



tion about the lives of particular slaves, Woodlawn is incorporating new thematic material into the furnishing plan as well as the tour, including a reproduction slave pallet two guides have made, which is being used in a bedchamber. At Cliveden, an exhibit on African Americans will convey to the public that slavery did not just occur in the South. Several sites are setting up committees of local educators, historians, and community members to advise them on interpreting African-American history, to develop outreach programs, and to recruit volunteers.

This process is by no means over, and we have a long way to go, especially in finding the most effective ways to ensure the public receives the new interpretation. At the February workshop, a staff member from Drayton Hall had the participants do a guide training exercise, used to surface discomfort in talking about the history of blacks and whites at that site. Each person was given a 3x5 card and asked to complete the following sentence as they thought a guide, or even they, might: "I would be more comfortable talking to visitors about slavery if..."

Some of the responses that were handed in, read, and discussed, included:

"...if I felt I had good information and not just generalities."

"...if there were no African Americans in my group."

"...if I weren't white with a Southern accent."

"...if I was sure my supervisor was really behind me."

In terms of fostering a dialogue with visitors about the history of slavery, many issues need to be addressed. Perhaps above all, there is the crying need for a more diverse staff at all of these sites. Still, all of these sites are in very different places than they were last summer.

*Dependency buildings, possibly the kitchen and laundry, Oatlands, Leesburg, Virginia. Photo courtesy National Trust for Historic Preservation (OT.out.0085).*



Looking back on what's been accomplished thus far, there are several factors that stand out as being instrumental in nurturing change. Perhaps first and foremost, a group of sites has been participating in this process together. The resources of each staff have been strengthened and enlarged by interaction and collaboration with their peers. The group has included both professionals and the guides who are out on the front lines working directly with visitors. Second, the involvement of outside scholars who can help sites see their histories from different perspectives and in the context of larger themes has been critical. Third, within this context, the participants have begun to focus on the stories of individuals; even when the information is sketchy, there is a real person there, not just a group, and that makes a difference—and will make a difference to visitors.

While the history of blacks and whites on plantations is one of the most challenging issues we face as we look at our past, it is not the only sensitive topic or story hidden from view. Behind every great country estate is the story of the people whose labor enabled the owner to amass the great wealth needed to maintain a sumptuous lifestyle. Relationships between different ethnic groups, conflicts between workers and managers, and gender orientation are just a few other topics we need to address if we are to earn the public's high esteem for trustworthiness and value.

Ruth Abram, founder and president of the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, talks about the "Usable Past." What does it mean for historic sites to make the past usable? I think it means that while on the one hand our charge is to preserve and protect the buildings, landscapes, and collections in our care, when it comes to interpreting these sites to the public, we must do just the opposite. If we are going to be able to use the past to anchor our perspective and inform our choices for the present and future, we need to take the stories of these sites apart and open them up for exploration. The sites involved in the National Trust's slavery interpretation initiative will be meeting again this fall, and we'll see how far we've come.

#### Note

\* Columbia University Press, 1998.

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